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AN OFFICIAL CONFERENCE ON RELIGION IN JAPAN

By George Heber Jones, D.D., former Superintendent of Methodist Episcopal Missions in Korea

The keynote of the Japanese government during the past fifty years has been fearlessness. Wherever there has appeared a problem to be solved, a menace to be attacked or a peril to be met, the duty of the hour has been served without flinching, and the consequences incurred without complaining. It took courage to dismantle within one brief generation the institutions of feudalism, reform class distinctions, rebuild society, revolutionize industry and commerce, remodel education and reorganize the entire life of the people. But it has been done in a way that has challenged the admiration of the world, and this is the more significant because of the fact that while due credit should be given to the helpful relation of foreign influence and the large contribution made by the men of the West in bringing about these changes, it cannot be denied that the marvelous transformation wrought has been due to Japanese inspiration, initiative and effort. It was no easy thing for Kido, Saigo, Okubo, Ito and Inouye and the men of their day to break with the Japanese past, turn their backs upon its traditions and lay low in the dust its institutions, and only a conviction immeasurably deep in its purpose and mightily dynamic in its impulse, united with the boldness and audacity of the Samurai knighthood, could nerve them for the work.

It is a hopeful sign of present-day Japan that that same spirit of fearlessness and, we might say, political audacity still prevails. The nation is beset with problems as serious and intricate as those which confronted the men of the Restoration and to meet and solve them will require wisdom and courage of a high order. Among these problems that

of the development of the moral life of the nation is becoming more and more acute and insistent. To have ignored it would have been to stultify the political sagacity of Japanese leadership, but to meet it in some bold and striking way is only to continue the record of the past. We are therefore not surprised at the developments.

About the beginning of the present year (1912) the world was startled by an official summons issued from the ministry of home affairs, for a conference under government auspices of the religious authorities of Japan. There was no previous intimation of such a step. The traditions of the modern government of Japan were against the possibility of it, for the separation between state and religion has been rigorously enforced. It is true a condition of affairs prevailed which constituted a preparation for it. There has been much discussion among Japanese leaders concerning the state of moral life in the nation. The constant criticism of the commercial integrity, the discussion among thinking Japanese of the decay of the old ethical ideals, the discovery of tendencies among student communities toward moral license, and the uncovering of such moral enormities as the Kotoku anarchistic plot had alarmed society. On April 19, 1912, Mr. Haseba, imperial minister of education, in the course of instruction issued to the directors of the higher schools of Japan, is quoted by the *Japan Times* to the following effect:

The minister made a strong protest against the loss of robust and steady character among students of the present day, and the prevailing tendency to effeminacy and infirmity of will. Firm character and a spirit of self-reliance and self-exertion, being the quality forming the basis of moral and intellectual training, the directors should redouble their efforts in arousing this spirit in their pupils.

Without multiplying quotations of this nature, the above is sufficient to indicate the feeling of anxiety which prevails. A reading of the current discussions in the periodical press of Japan, indicates that there is a widespread conviction that there is something lacking in the national life which must be supplied, if moral decay and disaster are to be

averted. The government readily recognized this problem, and it was the conviction of Mr. Tokonami, vice-minister of home affairs, that religion could give special help to the state in its efforts to meet this growing problem in the body politic. In explaining the purpose of the government in calling the conference of religion Mr. Tokonami took the position that religion has a direct relation to the moral problems of a people and that there was nothing inherently dangerous in recognizing religion as a function in national life, to which even the government might turn for help, for religion must have a solution for moral problems if it has any reason for existence at all. The government therefore in view of the seriousness of the situation determined to enlist the power of religion and a conference of the representatives of Japan's three Faiths, Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity was called for February 25.

The public announcement of the government's purpose, startled Japanese thought. Difficulties appeared. The ministry of education rather than that of home affairs was regarded as the source of the nation's moral and ethical training—how would it then adjust itself to this apparent invasion of its sphere of activity by another department of government. The line of cleavage between the government and religion was a wide one, but here was the government itself crossing this gulf and recognizing religion as a coöperative factor in meeting national questions. The project was so new and the idea underlying it so vague that misunderstanding of its real object was inevitable.

In the course of the discussion which resulted, it soon became clear that the religious leadership of Japan regarded the proposition with favor. The Christians led off to the surprise of all with expressions of unreserved confidence in the possibilities and character of the conference. Some were inclined to think that any project which involved the getting together of Shintoism, Buddhism and Christianity on a common platform was chimerical and absurd. How could the Christians consent to meet with the other faiths in a matter of such fundamental importance? But not for a single instance did the Christians debate the matter,

but responded heartily and courageously. The same thing is true of the Buddhists. The day before the session of the conference, a meeting was held in the Zozojo temple, Shiba, Tokio, attended by forty-one delegates, representing all the sects, except the Higashi Honganji, and it was agreed to participate in the conference and to do everything possible to make it a success.

And yet there was opposition of a strenuous character in certain quarters, though it proved impotent. Some denounced the conference as implying the first steps towards the reëstablishment of a religious hierarchy; others contended that it was either an invasion of religion by politics, or an unwarrantable intrusion of politics into religion and therefore a real menace to the well-being of the state. A small section of the Buddhists came out in direct antagonism against it. Just previous to the opening of the conference a meeting was held in Tokio of representatives of metropolitan newspapers and periodicals which advocated Buddhism, which protested against the conference, and agreed to oppose the proposal. They called on all Buddhists to refrain from participation in it and appointed a committee of ten to induce the government to abandon the idea. They also passed a resolution to secure an interpellation of the government in parliament in regard to the matter. From this it will be seen that the conference created considerable debate.

On Saturday, February 24, the conference convened in the Peers Club, Tokio, seventy-two delegates being present, divided as follows: Buddhists, 50; Shintoists, 15; Christians, 7. There were also present the following distinguished members of the government: Mr. Hara, minister of home affairs; Admiral Saito, minister of the navy; Mr. Matsuda, minister of justice; Mr. Tokonami, vice-minister of home affairs; and Mr. Fukuhara, vice-minister of education. The home minister presided and made a brief address in which he stated that:

He recognized and appreciated the services rendered by the gentlemen present in their respective forms of faith towards the advancement of public morals. He believed that in order to pro-

mote sound spiritual progress parallel to the material development of the nation and to improve the social condition of the people, the state ought to depend very much upon the help of his audience.

Aside from hearing the address of the home minister and an informal discussion among themselves, nothing was done on the first day of the conference, except the appointment of standing committees, one from each of the three faiths, to formulate a statement of the recommendation which each religion would make to the government in view of the problem proposed. These statements were found to be in such practical agreement that the three committees met as a united committee under the presidency of Reverend Mr. Shibata, the leader of the Shintoists. The representatives of the three religions were here able to agree upon an unanimous statement which was presented to and adopted by the conference at its session in Kazoku Kaikan, February 26. This statement was as follows:

WHEREAS, we realize that the motive of the government which called the conference of delegates of the three religions, respecting the authority of religion, is rooted in the idea that the state religion and education should be true to their missions respectively, and coöperate for the improvement of national morality and the betterment of social conditions, and in upholding the imperial honor and glory, and in taking part in the progress of the age. These are in agreement with our platform. Hence, appreciating its spirit and being true to the principles of our faiths respectively, and hoping that we should endeavor for the great mission of the evangelization of the nation, and that the government should make efforts for the realization of the same purpose in a truthful and sincere spirit, we pass the following resolutions:

1. *Resolved*, that each of us should endeavor in the preaching of propagandism, to uphold the imperial honor and glory and further the progress of national morality.

2. *Resolved*, that we hope that the government will respect religion, promote harmonious relations of the state, religion, and education, and utilize them for the development of the nation.

The conference adjourned with mutual expressions of good-will and in the conviction that a broad base had been laid for effective coöperation among themselves, to meet the responsibility laid upon them by the government.

In estimating the results of the conference it must be confessed that the direct output was of such a general and

apparently attenuated character that little appears to have been achieved, and yet a closer view convinces one that such is far from being the case. The fact that a conference constituted of such diverse and apparently irreconcilable elements could reach a basis of mutual understanding and good-will is of itself of large significance. This fact was ably stated by the talented editor of the *Japan Times* in an article of March 1, 1912, in which speaking of the conference he says:

The keynote of the new movement and a new movement it must needs be if the conference resolutions are to be translated into fact—will be coöperation by the leaders of the different creeds. But this is only to say that those leaders should make new endeavor to arouse, foster and deeply and ineradicably implant in the minds of the followers of the different faiths the spirit of coöperation and fraternity. For in the exclusive spirit rife among their followers, as is the case at present, much of the effort for coöperation on the part of their leaders is bound to go to waste. From this point of view, it will be well, therefore, for the leaders to make up their minds before they launch on their movement, that it will mean a very radical mental revolution among their flocks. Yet no one will deny that such a revolution, if properly engineered and accomplished, would result in immeasurable good to the country for it will be the creation of a new united national force for the moral advance of the people. And the value and importance of such a force will be most evident to those who have hitherto seen with regret many worthy projects for the moral well-being of the country fall through or attain far less success than they deserved, just because they were promoted by the followers of one creed or another, thereby lacking the support practically of the whole nation, ensuring thus their complete success with far-reaching effect. It will be most important, then, for the leaders of religion, that while they adhere to their own creeds, they are determined first and above all to merge their efforts wherever they are called upon to act and make a common cause of their activity for the sake of the nation, and not for one creed, denomination, or sect.

It is still too early to gauge the real value of the conference in giving a more effective alignment to religious organization and power in meeting the religious problem of Japan. Certain things stand out in connection with the fact and composition of the conference, which are very significant.

1. It marks the beginning of a new attitude of the Japanese government towards religion and the religious life of the nation. The conference was given the dignity of an

official function. Its purpose, date and composition were fixed by government authority. Even the personnel of the delegations was not left to the respective religious bodies, but was nominated by government. Thus the body possessed a significance that it would not have enjoyed as a voluntary gathering to discuss the questions submitted.

2. In the conference Christianity was recognized on a plane of equality with the two great historic faiths of the people, Shintoism and Buddhism. When we recall the fact that many now living can remember the time when there stood official sign boards in the public highways prohibiting Christianity and setting a price upon the heads of its teachers we can get some idea of the revolution which has taken place in the religious conceptions and attitude in Japan, by this unquestioning and hearty recognition of the position now occupied by the once proscribed faith in the life of the nation. This fact is of special significance in view of a tendency in certain quarters to charge Japan with being infused with anti-Christian sentiments and determined to crush out Christianity. To all such the status accorded Christianity in the conferences is a full and sufficient answer.

3. It is peculiarly significant that Japan should recognize the responsibility of the government not only to stamp out crime and enforce statutory laws but to give attention to and conserve the development of personal character among the people. The conference marks a short and hesitating step in that direction but it seems to indicate that the thought of the political leadership of Japan is leaning that way. If this is carried out in some practical manner it may have results of large value. There is little doubt that lawlessness has its beginning in the formative years of the life of the youth of a nation. Secular education must necessarily confine itself to the training of the intellectual faculties, a training which does not involve the formation of strong moral character. When government turns itself to religion to supply the thing which is lacking in secular education, the great danger is that it may be betrayed into an alliance with one particular form of religious life to the

exclusion of other religious interpretations which may have their contributions to make. This danger has been avoided in the present instance by the recognition of those forms of religious life which have vitality and power and exercise undeniable influence in the life of the whole people of Japan. We await with interest the outcome.

4. It is significant that three such diverse religious forms could find a common ground of meeting as has been the case in this conference. Buddhism and Shintoism in all their fundamental conceptions of religious life and thought are separated from Christianity as far as the East is from the West. Christianity is certainly intolerant to many things in these historic faiths, yet in spite of these differences, the leaders were able to agree upon a policy involving mutual confidence, a common anxiety to promote the public welfare, and a determination to contribute the best things in each faith, to the solution of the common problem. This understanding was brought about with no surrender of the substantial verities for which Christianity stands. If the policy outlined is honorably and earnestly carried out it should result in an enormous gain to moral life and efficiency in Japan.